

## **Sermon Easter 7, Year A 2023, Gospel John: 17:1-11**

### **To Know God: United in Eternal Life Now**

*God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: Open our hearts and our minds to know You. Amen.*

The gospel reading today begins what scholars refer to as the high-priestly prayer, suggesting that here Christ is acting as a high priest, making intercession to God on humanity's behalf. It comes near the end of his Farewell Discourse at the last supper with the disciples, on the night before he will die. He will soon leave the room, cross the Kidron Valley, and enter the garden of where he will be arrested. In about 18 hours he will be dead. You know the rest of the story. Chapter 17 in John portrays Jesus' teaching as a prayer between the Son and the Father, and we are invited to overhear this intimate conversation. Picture Jesus, in that room with his anxious and fearful disciples, men and women, all now aware that Jesus is leaving, in fact will soon be dead, now all quiet as Jesus begins to pray. He wants to tell them one last time before he leaves that they will be charged with continuing his mission after his death, that it will not be easy for them, to pray for their protection, and finally pray that "they will be one," meaning one body united in God. He has promised them another Advocate, the Holy Spirit, and she will stay with them after he leaves. For Jesus the culmination of his work and ministry, his core message, is that they—and we—know God, which he says is eternal life. "Knowing" describes a powerful, active, and intimate relationship. By knowing God they and we will enter into a new life today, a life of love and justice and service. Knowing God is eternal life, Jesus says, and that will be evident in our love, which is his singular commandment in this gospel. He ends this prayer with a request for protection, and for unity, "so that they may be one, as we are one." In other words, that we be united in God.

"United!" What does unity look like? Unity throughout the world, unity in our own country, unity within Christianity, unity in The Episcopal Church USA,

unity in our diocese, in our own parish? We will get to that shortly, but first we need to address a problem, one that has something to do with unity. Some interpret Jesus' words to be exclusionary, as when he says "I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me." What does he mean by that?

I think, that in order to understand the author of John's gospel portrayal of Jesus and of his words, we have to have some historical context. The author has a dualistic view of the world, that being a view of "us" and "them," the "other." He often uses the word "world," and by that he means those who do not accept Jesus, in strongly negative ways, as a dangerous and hostile place that opposes God's justice and mercy and love. We have to remember that the author of this Gospel was part of an early Christian group we now call the Johannine community attempting to carve out an identity within a world that rejects its message. He describes the world as worthy of saving, but it has fallen under the control of another, and this "world" rejects Jesus. So, in this prayer for his followers that we read this morning, when we hear Jesus say "I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me," we have to take this historical context into consideration. The Johannine community was living in a divided world, in bitter conflict—not only theologically but also facing persecution and exclusion—against those who rejected Jesus, or at least rejected their own understanding of Jesus. If we were to accept this dualistic view of the world, this "us versus them", this "we are saved but you are not" perspective, then I think we miss the heart of what Jesus the Christ offers us. Jesus is the universal Christ who in John's very gospel "was in the beginning with God...through whom all things came into being...the life and the light of **all** people." If we restrict our worldview to exclude those who see the world differently, who have no understanding or belief in what we as Christians call Christ, then we miss the very universality of what I believe the Christ is. As others have said, "Christ is bigger than Christianity," and much bigger than the

divisions between the people back then two thousand years ago and between us today. The Christ lives in all people. Jesus goes on to define eternal life in this passage today when he says “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” That is in fact the only biblical definition of eternal life, that being to know God. Unlike in the synoptic gospels, where eternal life is rarely mentioned and stands mostly as a future hope, here in John it is a present reality. Do John’s words which he attributes to Jesus imply that there is no other way into God, and no other way to eternal life? That people of all other nations and tribes and cultures and religions are excluded? I think not!! Jesus himself summarizes his life on earth as creating the opportunity for people to know God, and in so knowing to experience eternal life. He is certainly The Way for Christians, but does that rule out all other ways, other paths, other journeys into God and life eternal? The wideness of God’s presence and mercy in other parts of scripture, along with the recognition that our actions as Christians are so often not Christ-like, suggests that we should interpret John’s text more generously. We all need God’s protection from our own worst actions, and that protection extends to others unlike us but whom God also loves.

So, let’s return to this idea of unity. It would appear that disunity, rather than unity, is the defining reality in the church today, as well as in our secular world of politics and government. Look at the church, what we call the “catholic”, that being universal, church of Christ. There are hundreds or thousands of denominations and subdenominations. We argue over just about everything: who can be ordained, and what words we can use when we pray. We argue about theology: for instance was there really a virgin birth? We argue about our affiliations with this or that group around the world including our own communities, such as right here with “Black Lives Matter.” We argue over how our churches participate in secular life, who we will allow to get married, should the church support abortion rights, economic justice, care for the poor and

those living on the streets of our city. Some in the church even argue about who can receive communion. On and on it goes. It's painful. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that this is nothing new. When there were still people walking around who had known Jesus face to face, the church communities were arguing, including among the many different ways of following Christ: what is orthodox and what is heretical? They argued over who could share a meal, over whose party represented the "real" church, over if you could be a real Christian if you didn't have certain spiritual gifts, even if you had to be circumcised. Disunity—not unity—ruled the day then and it seems to now. Does this mean that Jesus' prayer today, his prayer that we all would be "one," was an unanswered prayer? Perhaps we need to look closer at what we mean, and perhaps what Jesus meant by unity, by "being one." I think he was talking about what the Kingdom of God looks like, or can look like. What does this Kingdom of God look like for us today? Is it more than just an ideal? How can there be so much discord, so many differences of opinion, different faiths, different ideas, and yet still be love, the kind of love Jesus teaches and says will be the foundation of this Kingdom?

Yes, we are challenged by our differences, in things like radically different interpretations of just how wide God's love is, from Ephesians "the breadth and length and height and depth" of that love: the full inclusion of all God's people. How do we realize this "oneness" Jesus prays for? And how does this "oneness" of Jesus apply to other religions, Judaism, Islam, and others? Who is excluded? Is anybody excluded? Especially in the context of increasing religious fundamentalism across Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, perhaps we need to see things differently. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests in his book The Dignity of Difference, we need a theology of religions to help us recognize the image of God in the face of those who are not in our own image. Jesus says that to find God is eternal life. To find God in the faces of all humankind surely is a goal of the eternal life into which Jesus invites us. Our God intends that all families of earth be blessed.

Where do we in our lives today see this kind of love, examples of people breaking down barriers between one another—between their own faith and the faith of another, barriers that separate them ethnically or racially or culturally or politically—when people cross over into another’s way of thinking or acting? When as has been said by the expression first attributed by Native American tribes “you can’t understand someone until you’ve walked a mile in my shoes,” reaching out with the kind of love Jesus says we see in the Kingdom? I think we see it a lot of places. We see it in scripture with the Good Samaritan where the outcast despised Samaritan helps the beaten man lying on the road after the priest and the Levite had passed him by. We see it in movies and in books. And we see it in the lives of so many around us, people who reach out with loving actions to those who are so different from themselves in so many ways, including right here in our own parish where so many of you work so hard to help others in need.

I think what Jesus is praying for is “oneness,” unity, and inclusivity. I want to tell a story that I heard in a sermon by Alistair Begg, a Scottish minister. It’s called “The Man on the Middle Cross.” Maybe you’ve seen it too. I have changed it a little, have taken a little homiletical license, in order to make a point which is a little different than the one Begg makes. Think about the three crosses at the crucifixion at the place called The Skull, Jesus in the middle. There are two thieves on either side hanging on their own crosses. Right before he dies Jesus tells one of them, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” I’d love to find that guy that Jesus promises paradise, really like to ask some questions. And here is the conversation I would have: “Tell me how you got it? How did you get this eternal life? What did you do? You’re a known crook, a bandit. You never cared about anyone in your life. You were never baptized. You never went to a Bible study class. Never learned the creeds. Never went to a church. I don’t get it. What are you doing here?” “I don’t know.” He says.

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I just don’t know!”

Still trying to figure this guy out, exactly how he found eternal life, I bring in an expert on the theology of salvation, and she says to the bandit: “Excuse me. Let me get this straight. I need to ask you a few questions. ‘Are you clear about the doctrine of Justification by Faith?’

“Never heard of it.”

“And what about the doctrine of the church as the Body of Christ?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then on what basis did you find Paradise?”

“Because that man on the middle cross told me I could go there.”

Now, this guy, this thief who has found eternal life, wasn’t a member of any particular religion, ethnic group, political party, maybe didn’t even have a family. All he did was say “Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” I think he had come to know God, and that’s all it took.